

*The Allure of the Archives.* By Arlette Farge. Translated by Thomas Scott-Railton. Foreword by Natalie Zemon Davis. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013. 152 pp. Notes. Hardcover. \$25.00.

This long-awaited translation of Arlette Farge's 1989 classic, *Le Goût de l'archive*, is a welcome addition to a small but growing body of literature exploring encounters with archives. The book details a noted French historian's memories and ruminations about the archival research she performed using Ancien Régime records in preparation for her doctoral dissertation in 1974. Anecdotal reminiscences recall the practices of repositories in Paris in the early 1970s, recounting the author's engagement with primary sources, including frustrations, philosophical reflections, self-doubts, and identification with the subjects of her research. Included are astute observations about how historical knowledge is produced through the complex process of converting research in original documents into historical narrative and argumentation. Lively and often profound, the text is nicely complemented by Natalie Zemon Davis's perceptive introduction.

Farge's account centers on eighteenth-century police and judicial records at the Archives nationales, the Bibliothèque nationale, and, more particularly, the Archives de la Bastille at the Arsenal Library in Paris. We watch as she negotiates her way through the foot-dragging and confusion of obtaining a reader's card at the Arsenal Library, locates appropriate offices in a welter of poorly identified rooms, studies oversized volumes in search of registers and call numbers, vies with other researchers for the best reading room seats, is distracted by the coughing and quirkiness of fellow readers, and wins the attention (or fails to) of archival staff. The archivists seem distant and impatient. The reading room is cold in summer as well as winter. Some of the documents, unpunctuated and oddly spelled, can hardly be read. "Your eyes alone are not up to the task," Farge indicates. "[T]he only way to decipher . . . is to pronounce it out loud, to whisper the disjointed writing" (p. 59). Her descriptions linger over the distinctive smells of old bundles, the delicious sensation of touching bindings and paper, the excitement of discovery, and the fascination of eavesdropping on forgotten voices from a bygone era.

The book warns against surrendering to digressions, unguarded identification with the lives glimpsed in "talkative" (p. 73) records, and other seductive traps of archival research. The police and judicial files detail tavern brawls, libel, blasphemy, domestic violence, theft, dog bites, murder, networks of police informers, and subversion, recording verbatim statements that sketch vivid pictures of downtrodden lives as well as the machinery of suppression. One arrested man under interrogation believes he is being punished by God for loving a married woman. A washerwoman, accused of sedition, seems more concerned about correcting her name for the record—she admits that she is sometimes called "Pockmarked Fatty," but she does not respond because it is not her real name and she does not like it (p. 83). Historians, Farge advises, should be close to, yet distanced from, the words, events, and personalities contained in primary sources: "History is never the simple repetition of archival content, but a pulling away from it, in which we never stop asking how and why these words came to wash ashore on the manuscript page. One must put the archive aside for a while, in order to better think

on one's own terms . . . alternating tasks of exclusion and reintegration of documents and writing, as you add your own style to the thoughts that emerge" (p. 75).

Many of the observations and insights are applicable to archives and archival research in general. Archives are a vast ocean, Farge suggests, where unwary researchers can sink or find themselves hopelessly adrift. Archivists, she maintains, keep their bearings in this overwhelming expanse of material by reducing their collections to indices and call numbers, to cubic and linear meters, to determinations of how much shelf space may be required for a particular purpose, "a clever way of coming to grips with the archives, of taming them, while . . . recognizing the impossibility of ever taking full possession of them" (pp. 4–5). The French word *fonds*, as a note reminds us, refers not only to archival collections, but also to the ocean floor (p. 131).

The stories contained in "raw traces" in the archives take shape, according to Farge, "only when you ask a specific type of question of them. . . ." (p. 12). *Dépouiller*, the standard French term for unpacking bundles of documents and sifting through them, derives from roots meaning unveiling, removing clothes, or skinning an animal to get the meat inside (p. 131). Somewhat surprisingly, the book's translation by Thomas Scott-Railton renders *le goût* in the title as "allure" instead of "taste," even though the latter more accurately invokes the sensual pleasure described by Farge as she immerses herself in the figurative consumption of archival documents.

Farge decries the ability of reproductions to provide researchers with direct, personal connections to the past. "An archival manuscript is a living document; microfilm reproduction, while sometimes unavoidable, can drain the life out of it" (p. 15). Her opinion, if she revised it for the twenty-first century, would probably likewise disparage the relative lifelessness of digitized collections. *The Allure of the Archives* is an intriguing case study of a thoughtful historian's encounters with archival practices and archival research some 40 years ago. One hopes that American (and French) archivists today are more inviting, less punctilious, more eager to engage in meaningful dialogue, and more helpful in suggesting appropriate research opportunities and directions.

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